

House Appropriations Committee
Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee
Testimony (as Prepared) by David Eisner
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be here today to discuss the contributions that senior volunteers make to their communities, and to our country, each year through Senior Corps and other programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service funded by this Committee.

RSVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program each have more than 30 years of experience in tapping the skills, talents, and experience of seniors to meet pressing community needs. In addition, our Senior Corps programs – through which 540,000 senior volunteers will serve this year in more than 70,000 community-based organizations nationwide – are working with AmeriCorps*VISTA, which is also funded by this Committee, to develop new models of service that leverage the number of seniors who participate in volunteer activities.

Benefits to seniors provided by Corporation programs take two forms: volunteer opportunities for seniors, and programs that provide services and benefits to seniors. Because the segment of the U.S. population age 55 and older is growing significantly, it is critically important that we address both these areas.

There are two predominant schools of thought about the aging of America. One school sees the coming wave of older boomers as a huge drain on resources, with the potential to wreak financial ruin on the Social Security and Medicare systems, and draw resources from other areas. The other school – and the one to which I subscribe – looks at this highly educated, highly motivated group as a source of solutions to social problems. The boomers may not have been as civically involved as their parents' generation, but it behooves us as a nation to find ways to take advantage of their skills, their experience, and – especially after September 11, 2001 – their desire to give back.

Senior volunteering yields a double benefit. Not only do communities benefit from the services provided by senior volunteers, but the volunteers themselves realize health benefits through social interaction, ongoing engagement, opportunities to contribute to society, and a renewed sense of purpose and accomplishment. Thus, supporting current senior volunteer programs and expanding opportunities for seniors to serve is a critically important way to capitalize on the aging of America.

The chief emphasis of the proposed 2005 Senior Corps budget is to achieve the goal of supporting 600,000 senior volunteers. In his Call to Service, President Bush challenged Americans of all ages to participate in the well-being of their communities through volunteering. We strongly support that message and believe that our programs should keep pace with the growing numbers of older Americans in order to get the most

out of this valuable national resource. The goal of 600,000 senior volunteers is a benchmark that we believe can be achieved with the 2005 budget request.

In the panoply of programs represented today at this table, national service fills a special and distinct role. Even though some of our senior volunteers receive a small stipend of \$2.65 an hour for their service, we are not a jobs program. Indeed, the gross amount collected by our Senior Companions and Foster Grandparents is not enough to live on – in fact, it often doesn't even cover expenses. And, unlike the Department of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Program, our programs are not designed to retrain older Americans and move them into the general workforce. Instead, our programs are about service – about meeting unmet needs in communities, and about helping our country meet great challenges.

Last month, President Bush issued an Executive Order on National and Community Service Programs in which he directed the Corporation to adhere to four fundamental principles in the administration of our programs: 1) support and encourage greater engagement of Americans in volunteering; 2) be more responsive to State and local needs; 3) be more accountable and effective; and 4) increase involvement with faith-based and other community organizations.

Our programs already have been moving steadily in those directions. Since 2003, grant guidelines have added "volunteer generation" as a specific criterion for the awarding of RSVP grants. In 2003, the Corporation imposed newer, more rigorous

performance measures on the Programming for Impact initiative, an effort begun in 1996 to make the Senior Corps programs more accountable for results. And, we have recently begun a number of new initiatives to reach out to faith-based organizations, some of which include collaborations with AmeriCorps*VISTA. In many of these partnerships, Senior Corps volunteers provide the direct services, such as mentoring children of prisoners, while VISTAs not only set up and administer the programs, but also recruit and manage additional volunteers from congregations and other faith-based entities. In addition, a number of VISTA projects – like the Senior Sense program in Maine, or the Elder Care Service program in Florida, are designed specifically to benefit senior citizens. And, about 14 percent of VISTA members are 55 or older themselves.

Recently, the Corporation, USA Freedom Corps, and the UPS Foundation commissioned a comprehensive study of volunteer management capacity at charities and congregational social service outreach programs across the United States. The study found that one of the most prominent challenges faced by charities and congregations is recruiting volunteers during the workday. With their flexibility in terms of available time, seniors will be a rich source of such needed assistance.

And Senior Corps offers something more. With more than 30 years of experience in recruiting and placing senior volunteers, Senior Corps is in some ways on the cutting edge of finding effective ways to capture the energy, skills, talents, and experience of older Americans and using them to the advantage of our communities. By increasing opportunities for them to become part of the solution to the problems we face as a nation,

and by increasing support to benefit them when they are in need, we believe that the entire nation stands to gain.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I am available to address any questions that the Subcommittee may have.